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SUBJECT: HONDURAS SEEING INCREASING NUMBERS OF CUBAN
RAFTERS; MOST USE COUNTRY AS WAY STATION TO THE U.S.

REF: A. USDAO TEGUCIGALPA HO 021257Z NOV 04

1B. USDAO TEGUCIGALPA HO 241030Z SEP 04

11. (SBU) Honduras, for various reasons, is emerging as a new, preferred port for Cuban migrants by sea. Primarily, Honduras acts as a way station for Cubans on their way to the U.S. The route appears to usually be the same: migrants leave from Comaguey in the Santa Cruz province of Cuba, stopping for supplies and rest on Grand Cayman Islands, then continuing either to the Honduran Bay Islands or the north coast of Honduras, according to Government of Honduras (GOH) Immigration officials and local press reports.

12. (SBU) There have been recent cases where Cuban migrants landed in the Honduran Swan Islands, which are even farther out to sea than the Bay Islands. This new stopping point has created numerous problems for Honduran Immigration and the Honduran Navy, because there is neither the infrastructure nor the resources to deal with migrants who land in this remote location. The only GOH presence on the Swan Islands is a small Navy detachment, which can barely feed itself, much less unanticipated visitors. There are no immigration officials on the islands and basic communication with the mainland is sketchy.

13. (U) Upon arrival in Honduran territory, the GOH has little to do with addressing the migrants' day-to-day needs (the GOH lacks funds and facilities to do so). Instead, while the migrants' status is being established during first 60 days, the local NGO representative for the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNCHR) acts as a legal and humanitarian buffer, providing medical care, food, and shelter.

14. (SBU) As a signatory to the various human rights conventions and the 1951 Convention for the Protection of Refugees, Honduran Immigration authorities must by law accept migrants who solicit refugee status, that is, until their individual circumstances are properly investigated. Although each case is addressed individually, most of these migrants do not fulfill the requirements for refugee status. Instead, based on the humanitarian or economic reasons of each migrant, the GOH often grants a different migrant status to each individual case, awarding migrants temporary or permanent residency, according to Honduran Immigration. One status frequently granted by Immigration is territorial asylum, which is different from the status of political asylum given by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

15. (SBU) If the GOH does not grant residency, refugee, or some other status to the migrants, there are very few other options. There is no formal immigration agreement between the GOH and the Government of Cuba (GOC). In order for the GOH to deport migrants back to Cuba, they must request permission from the GOC. These requests normally take between four and six months to process and are nearly always turned down. As a result, there have been only a couple of cases where Cuban migrants voluntarily returned to Cuba, each time with the assistance of the Cuban Embassy in Honduras.

16. (SBU) As of November 24, 140 Cuban rafters had landed on Honduran territory this year, double the number from 2003. (Another 13 landed in the Bay Islands the first week of December.) Of those that have arrived this year, eighty percent have supposedly remained in Honduras, whereas the rest have moved on through Guatemala and Mexico in hopes of crossing the border into the U.S. Honduran immigration officials tell EmbOffs, however, that almost all of the Cuban migrants (even those granted permission to stay long-term in Honduras) eventually try to immigrate, legally or illegally, to the U.S.
Pierce